

**Latimer's Notebook – Summer 1918**  
**By Liz Walton**

In this section of his notebook, 656 Private Latimer Le Poidevin describes events after the disastrous battles in the Doulieu area which decimated the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry (RGLI). Losses here were such that the Battalion could no longer exist as a fighting force, the casualty lists from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, 1918 including the names of almost 400 men wounded, taken prisoner of war, missing or killed in action in just those three days.

Latimer did not fight in this battle, as he was one of the 10% kept in reserve, and when they were called forward their transport broke down and it was all over before he arrived at the front line. However he describes the events that followed thus:

*“We left on April 19<sup>th</sup> 1918, and marched towards Hazebrouck. From this place we did the same work as before, only more on the right of Caëstre, every day passing Hazebrouck which the Germans shelled day after day. At the side of this Farm where we were billeted there was a light railway which was called Hecke-Meulon. We were kept at this place for over a week, so one morning we was told to clean up our gear as the Brigade commander was going to inspect us during the afternoon and was going to give us a speech. We all wondered what was going to happen, we all thought it was for the line again. Well to our surprise this afternoon which was on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, 1918, the speech was to tell us that the Battalion was relieving us the same day, and to wish us au revoir and farewell. He had been very pleased to have the Guernsey Battalion in his Brigade, and he thanked us for the good work we had done while under his command. He wished us all good luck and of course we returned the same. So we left the 86 Brigade which belong to the 29<sup>th</sup> Division on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April, 1918.*

*We came away the same day from Hazebrouck having the 29<sup>th</sup> Division brass band to lead us down to the station. On our way down we passed some of the Battalions of the 29<sup>th</sup> going for the line. We arrived at a station called Ebblingham and camped for the night in a few tents which we put up for the night. The next morning we packed them up again and marched for the station. We left this station on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April and as the train was leaving the brass band of the Division played the farewell. On our way we passed St-Omer, also the quarries in which some of the Guernsey boys was working. During the night we arrived at Etaples and from the Station marched to No. 9 rest camp.*

*We left this camp on the 29<sup>th</sup> April and our little band in front marched through the town of Etaples and got billeted in a village called St-Aubin. I was only a day at this when I was taken sick with trench fever, and was admitted to Hospital on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, 1918, to No. 24 General Hospital, Etaples. The Battalion left St Aubin on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May for Montreuil where they joined the General Headquarters, and kept on GHQ for a time. The Battalion was billeted in a village called Ecuirees.”*

He then goes on to describe his admission to hospital in Etaples suffering from Trench Fever. This was a common disease of the period, transmitted by the bites of body lice which were ever present in the trenches. The chief symptoms were headaches, skin rashes, inflamed eyes and leg pains. Despite such wide-ranging symptoms, which were similar to those of typhoid and influenza the condition was not particularly serious. However it usually meant spending several weeks in hospital as victims tended to suffer relapses often after intervals of several days. Private Le Poidevin was sent to No. 24 General Hospital in Etaples, which had been established in June, 1915 and was to remain until well after the Armistice. The writer of *'Testament of Youth'*, Vera Brittain worked here as a VAD nurse from the Autumn of 1917 to the Spring of 1918. The pre-war population of Etaples amounted to a little over 5,000, but during the war the town became a vast Allied military camp and then a huge hospital complex, many hospitals being under canvas. These hospitals, which included eleven General, one Stationary, four Red Cross Hospitals and a Convalescent Depot, could deal with 22,000 wounded or sick.

He writes:

*"When I was taken to hospital I was fetched in a motor ambulance. When I arrived at the hospital I was in the waiting room, then I was taken to No.9 ward. We were about 40 sick in this ward and looked after by three nurses, two day time and one night time. I found my bed quite nice, and it was quite different laying between white sheets. There was over nine months I hadn't laid on a bed. Night and day there was sick getting brought in and taken away. Those going were either taken to another hospital or for Blighty. After a while I was there everything was getting on fine, getting well fed, then when I got a lot better and started to walk about. I used to visit the different hospitals about Etaples as every hospital was close to each other.*

*Then as I got strong enough to work, one of the nurses asked me if I wanted a job as orderly. I was only too pleased to take a job like this. My job was to take the meals around to the sick and wash up. Every morning I had to take in the dirty clothes and bring back clean. One day a French soldier was brought in, so when the doctor came around to visit the sick, I was the only one that could speak to this French man, so I had to speak for the doctor. Everything went on fine till one evening just about midnight the alarm went, Germans was raiding the place. They dropped two bombs at the top of our hospital where a few marquees had been put up. My word, the noise of these bombs coming down was something awful, and these marquees on fire.*

*This evening I stayed in bed as there was no other place for shelter. This was on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 1918, and during the raid 27 bombs was dropped over the hospitals and the town of Etaples. In our hospital alone over 200 came in that had got wounded during the raid and one camp that was close to Etaples there was 147 casualties in which 44 died. Between the soldiers and the French people there was [sic] over 1000 casualties.*

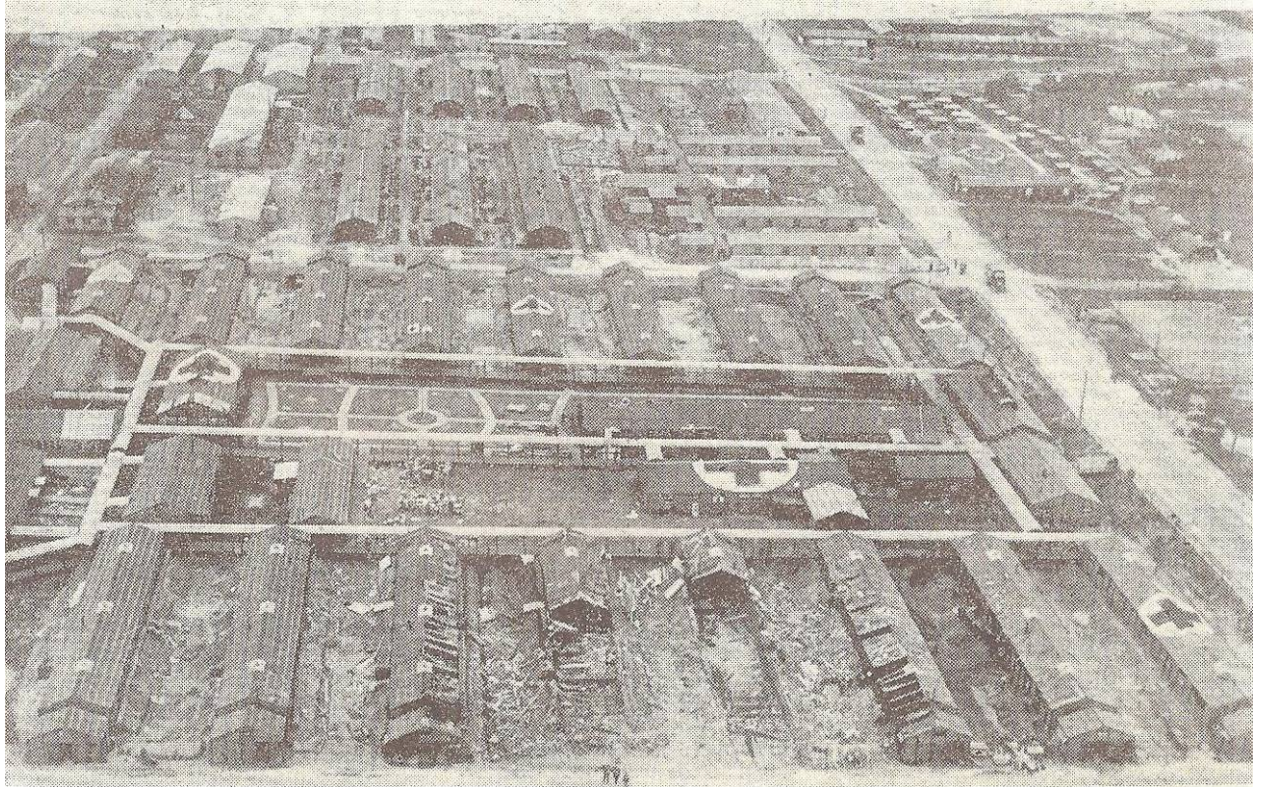
*The next day when we saw what had happened we started making trenches along side of every ward. The next night was as bad, I thought my last minute*

*had come. About the hospitals was nothing else but dead lying about. But the third night was the worst night for us. When the alarm was given the bombs was already dropping in the Hospital and before we had time to get in our trenches one bomb fell on No.17 ward, smashing all the windows of our ward. Some couldn't move from their beds, so we used to put the clothes of the ones that was able to walk on those that couldn't move.*

*After the bomb had hit No.17 there was not a piece of ward standing and some of the chaps that was in were never found again. A Canadian Hospital had five Canadian nuns killed, and one of the wards they found a door down with a chap laying on top dead and a nurse in under living. Then after the third night they began clearing the hospital, and only the ones that could walk about was kept back. Then at night time every nurse was carried away in motor ambulances, and we would sleep in the wood for the night, we used to take two or three blankets each and go down by the river for the night. We used to find ourselves back about six o'clock the next morning. This carried on for a week or so, and this week Gerry never came over at all, then he started again on his raiding."*

The War Diary of the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian Stationary Hospital confirms Latimer's description, noting how on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 1918, Germans aeroplanes attacked the hospitals at Etaples. The entry for Monday the 20<sup>th</sup> of May states:

*"Last night, about 10:30, we had a disastrous air raid as a result of which we lost two men (one killed and the other died of wounds) and had one man wounded and also the OC, Major EV Hogan, wounded. Enemy aircraft suddenly were heard, and began dropping bombs without our having received warning. Practically the entire Etaples hospital area was subjected to an aerial bombardment for fully an hour, after which the raiders departed, returning again some time after midnight, and dropped more bombs. They also employed machine guns. It is unofficially estimated that the total casualties in the Etaples area were about one thousand. Casualties were numerous in the staffs of several of the hospitals, and certain patients were also casualties."*



**Bomb Damage at Etaples (See Editor's Note)**

The war diary of Miss Maud McCarthy, the Matron-in-Chief, British Expeditionary Force (BEF)<sup>1</sup> confirms Latimer's account of digging trenches and going out into the countryside, stating that:

*"...Everywhere strong dug-outs are being made and in the meantime the whole of the day staff are being taken into the country in details with 2 officers and 2 NCOs in charge, the Matron and night staff remaining with the hospital."* The 'Summary of Inspections and Work done during the month away from Headquarters' for the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, 1918 describes how:

*"...There was a terrible raid right over the hospitals. Practically all the Etaples hospitals suffered, those which had the most casualties being the St John's Ambulance Brigade hospital, where 1 Sister was killed and 5 wounded, besides many patients and personnel, the Liverpool Merchant's Hospital (1 Sister wounded), No.24 General Hospital<sup>2</sup> (2 of the nursing staff wounded, one severely), No.56 General Hospital, where there were no casualties amongst the nursing staff but the administrative block was almost destroyed, and No.26 General Hospital, as well as the two Canadian hospitals (Nos.1 and 7) which had suffered so severely before. The St. John's Ambulance Brigade Hospital, which was beautifully equipped, is entirely wrecked."*

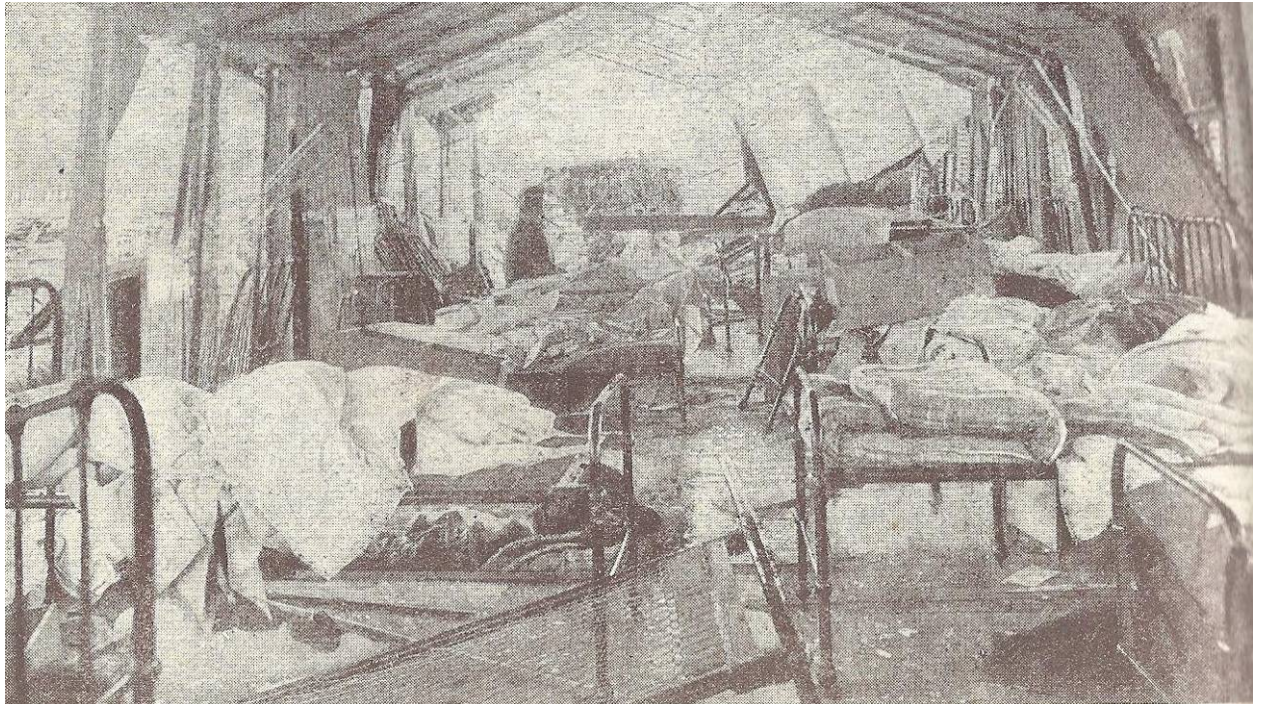
The entry for the 1<sup>st</sup> of June goes on to say:

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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives, WO95/3990.

<sup>2</sup> The hospital where Latimer was a patient.

*“Etaples air-raid: Received telephone message from Etaples saying that there had been a very bad air-raid the night before – nearly all the hospitals in the Etaples area had suffered, particularly the St. John’s Ambulance Brigade Hospital, Liverpool Merchant’s Hospital, 24, 26 and 56 General Hospitals. At the SJAB Hospital one Sister had been killed and 5 wounded and a few others were suffering from shock. At No.24 General Hospital<sup>3</sup>, Miss Freshfield, VAD, had been seriously wounded in the head, and one other Sister had been slightly wounded. Informed Matron-in-Chief, War Office, and BRCS, and DGMS.”*



**A damaged Ward at the SJAB Hospital (See Editor’s Note)**

All of these accounts match Latimer’s version of events. He then goes on to describe his move to a convalescent camp at Trouville, further along the coast:

*“Somehow or other I happened to pick up some bits of shell which poisoned my blood causing a rash over my body. The day before I left this hospital there was only three or four chaps left in my ward. These were getting the same sort of rash as myself, and on the 6<sup>th</sup> of June in the afternoon I left this hospital for another. We were fetched in motor buses for the station, then we got on a British Red Cross train. We had 18 hours journey, then from a station near Trouville we got on a light railway, which took us right up alongside of our hospital which was No.72 General Hospital, Trouville, J block, No. 4 ward. This was a very nice place, also a very large place. The hospital itself could hold 5,000 men, and there were two other hospitals which were as large. These three hospitals were close to each other, and besides they were 3 Convalescent camps with 5,000 men in each.*

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<sup>3</sup> The hospital where Latimer was a patient.

*After I had been in this hospital for a week, I was marked out fit, then I had to give in my blue suit and get a new suit of khaki. Leaving this hospital on the 11<sup>th</sup> June I was sent to No.15 Convalescent camp and put in R Company, No. 8 Hut. This was one of the finest places going, there were all kinds of sports every day, and two or three times a week we were marched down to the beach, which was about two miles away, having the brass band to lead us down. From this camp we were allowed out in the different villages nearby, only in the town of Trouville we had to have passes. We had to write out all the places and roads that was out of bounds. Here are the names of these places:*

*Cafe Blighty bar, Rue de La Mer.  
Cafe Venot in Rue Pont L'Eveque,  
Cafe Hudieson, " "  
Cafe Lion D'or " "  
Cafe Lecorna Reverick " "  
Hotel Tresnon, Rue Carnot""*

No. 72 General Hospital at Trouville was opened in December 1917 and remained there until October 1919. The official diary of the Matron-in-Chief, BEF<sup>4</sup> described it saying:

*"There are two hospitals already established and a third unit in the making, all composed of 2500 beds, entirely hutted, with fine accommodation for officers, Nursing Sisters and men. The hospital is built in self-contained blocks of 250 beds, each a little hospital in itself. Each unit has accommodation for 100 officers and the rest is for men. They have most splendid mess, dining rooms, kitchens, store-rooms, a great big reception hut and a good administrative block. The Sisters' quarters are first-rate in every respect – a great big mess and ante-room and accommodation for 125 people in cubicles, all under cover and connected by corridors. There are 4 bath-rooms only. All the out-houses, kitchens, etc. are first-rate, similar to those in our other units but larger in comparison. The unit is lighted with electricity and heated with coal stoves, and when the road is made and they have got rid of the mud, it will be first-rate. It is situated on the top of a hill. At the time of the visit 72 General Hospital had 1600 patients and they were taking in at 73 General Hospital the next day. They are beginning to lay out the grounds and are going to have large vegetable gardens."*

Latimer was said to be suffering from blood poisoning, probably as the result of shrapnel wounds (some bits of shell). The main treatment then was cleaning up the source and site of infection and if that didn't work, surgery might be needed. However he appears to have been one of the lucky ones with a good immune system. However a relapsing skin rash was also one of the symptoms of Trench Fever, the illness for which he was initially admitted to hospital. He seems to have made a fairly speedy recovery as he mentions

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<sup>4</sup> The National Archives, WO95/3990.

having to give in his blue suit and get a new khaki one. Soldiers staying in Military Hospitals were issued a Hospital Blue uniform. This clearly distinguishable bright blue uniform with a red tie was useful in helping medical staff to identify their patients but it also marked out those who had "Done their bit" when they were out and about. He also mentions going down to the beach once he was in Convalescent Camp. Convalescent or Command Depots were half way houses for casualties returning to the front - men who no longer required hospitalisation but were not yet fit to rejoin their units.

The Depot at Trouville had its own brass band consisting of convalescent bandsmen from various units which as Latimer described, led groups of convalescents to the beach for their daily exercise. The Imperial War Museum (IWM) also has images of various forms of entertainment such as an open air boxing match and performances in front of a large audience of troops by the "Bohemians" Concert Party. Their stage had been erected in the shell of a ruined building. The places that were out of bounds are all cafés except one which is a hotel. Presumably they were places where alcohol and "loose women" could be found and were therefore seen as possible sources of trouble and indiscipline for the recovering soldiers.

Latimer's period of convalescence was soon to come to an end. He notes:

*"I left this convalescent camp on the 25th of June 1918. There were squads leaving this camp every afternoon, for the base. From this camp we marched to a station in Trouville, being a few hundred together. Here we got on a Red Cross train which was very cosy. We arrived at Rouen at about mid-night, where we had something to eat and a bed till the morning, and about 10 o'clock the next morning we marched off for our base. I stayed at the base for about a week, and then I was sent off for the Battalion. From the Base we marched for the station, we were four Guernseys together, and got up in the old cattle truck. From Rouen we passed Abbeville and stopped at Etaples and took another train for Montreuil, then from the Station we marched through the town of Montreuil where we found here and there some of our Battalion on duty. Then at last we got to the Battalion headquarters, I got put in the same company, C, this being on the 3<sup>d</sup> of July."*

Later sections of his notebook go on to describe his time with the remnants of the RGLI at GHQ at Montreuil, and also his travels around northern France as a Lewis gunner, guarding the train which Haig used as his advanced GHQ. His descriptions of these events and his earlier notes on Passchendaele and Cambrai tie in as closely with official records as do the sections quoted here. This accuracy is quite remarkable considering the fact that he only wrote his notebook after he returned home in 1919, apparently from memory.

**(Editor's Note:** The pictures are from bound copies of The War Illustrated magazines of October and November, 1918. The originals are a little 'tired' so apologies. However, I hope that they illustrate the damage described by Latimer Le Poidevin sufficiently).